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Hoping to Return Home:

The Face of Venezuelan Migrants Crossing the Border to Colombia

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Hoping to Return Home:

The Face of Venezuelan Migrants Crossing the Border to Colombia

by

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Report

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Dedication

Dedicado con todo mi agradecimiento a: mis ancestros, mis padres, mi familia, mis amigos y nuevos amigos, mis profesores, toda la gente que he conseguido en la vida para bien o para mal que me han inspirado, motivado, enseñado dejándome sus conocimientos y experiencia; Y que con su amor o desamor me han enseñado algo en la vida. A dios y a mis guías espirituales que han aparecido en el momento preciso. A la vida que como dice Mercedes Sosa, me ha dado tanto y me sigue dando. A Homero, Isabel, Thais, Mitzi, Chino, Carolina, Filinto, Elizabeth, Sarah Episcopo, Damariz, Ku Wang Ting. A mis amores y amantes. A mi país y los migrantes de Venezuela y el mundo, quienes tienen que salir de su tierra para crear nuevas vidas en otros lugares. Gracias a todos. Dios los bendiga.

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Abstract

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The Face of Venezuelan Migrants Crossing the Border to Colombia

Yenibel Ruiz Mirabal, M.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2018

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In 2017, a record number of Venezuelans crossed that country's border to Colombia, fleeing the economic crisis, the shortage of food and medicine, the violence, and, in some cases, government political persecution. For Venezuelans, the adjustment has been uniquely difficult: at one time, their country was one of the richest countries in Latin America – a magnet for immigrants who wanted a better life. Their grief of leaving is accompanied by a hope to return home. The recent Venezuelan migration is also notable in the region's history because of its magnitude: in 2017 there were an estimated 1,000,000 Venezuelans crossing. For the least privileged of Venezuelan migrants, Colombia is the most natural destination: these countries not only share 1,378 miles of border, but they also have a common cultural and migratory history. Many of the Venezuelans who have recently made this journey have settled in Santa Marta, Colombia,

a coastal city 155 miles from the border, after crossing the border via illegal trails in the north, an area called La Guajira. Their stories represent the human faces of this unique migration process.

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Introduction

In 2017, a record number of Venezuelans crossed that country's border to Colombia, fleeing the economic crisis, the shortage of food and medicine, the violence, and, in some cases, government political persecution. For Venezuelans, the adjustment has been uniquely difficult: at one time, their country was one of the richest countries in Latin America – a magnet for immigrants who wanted a better life. Their grief of leaving is accompanied by a hope to return home. The recent Venezuelan migration is also notable in the region's history because of its magnitude: in 2017 there were an estimated 1,000,000 Venezuelans crossing. For the least privileged of Venezuelan migrants, Colombia is the most natural destination: these countries not only share 1,378 miles of border, but they also have a common cultural and migratory history. Many of the Venezuelans who have recently made this journey have settled in Santa Marta, Colombia, a coastal city 155 miles from the border, after crossing the border via illegal trails in the north, an area called La Guajira. Their stories represent the human faces of this unique migration process.

La Raya: The Migration Begins

Horns sound from all directions, but they do not drown out the hawkers' repeated calls: "How can I help you?" In less than 30 feet of sidewalk, side by side, the undocumented Venezuelans sell mobile phones, fresh-squeezed orange juice, *quemaditos* - burned CDs – tiny plastic cups of hot coffee, crafts, backpacks. Many items are made by the indigenous Colombian people of the Sierra de Santa Marta. Venezuelans at traffic lights clean car windshields. This is Santa Marta's downtown, where the local legal workers in the informal economy are mixed with the newcomers: the undocumented Venezuelan migrants.

Santa Marta is a tourist destination on Colombia's coast, three hours from the Venezuelan border. Some undocumented migrants say that it is a good city for beginning a new life and the majority of the Samarios, natives of Santa Marta, are kind and welcoming. Maybe because of the warmth of the locals, Venezuelans are still arriving here.

These migrants' journey to Santa Marta begins in La Raya, a border area located where the migration control checkpoint Paraguachón are outside the town of Maicao. Through Paraguachón, about 1,000 Venezuelans daily crossed the border. These areas are part of the Colombian state of Guajira bordering Venezuela populated by various indigenous communities named "Guajiros."

The Paraguachón checkpoint is the second most-trafficked point where Venezuelans cross the border into Colombia; the first is the city of Cucuta further south. As of July 2017, about 50 percent of the 600,000 Venezuelan migrants had crossed through Cucuta, and about 20 percent had crossed through Paraguachón in La Raya. "La Raya is the no man's land," said one of the Guajiros who sells water in Maicao, Colombia.

It is estimated that every day in La Raya, about 60 small Ford F-350 trucks with wooden rails, some with a canvas or plastic roof, cross the border. They drive on dirty illegal roads called las *las trochas*, illegal roads. The very same route was previously used for smuggling contraband merchandise; today the trucks are full of Venezuelan families and their belongings. Between 20 and 30 people among men, women, and children ride in each truck, bringing with them washing machines, mattresses, bags of clothes, and whatever dignity they have left. After *las trochas*, many of the migrants make their way to the Maicao bus station, located only five miles outside of La Raya.

Las trochas are located within the Guajira territory, a region in which the international border conventions have no validity.

“It is a scary experience,” said Ms. Policarpa Arévalo, a 63-year-old Venezuelan woman who decided to cross into Colombia through this no-man’s land. “You see people with serious facial expressions, covering their mouth and nose with bandanas. We do not know if they are indigenous people who are protecting themselves from the dust or criminals who hide their faces so as to not be recognized. Or both things."

The Guajiros control everything in the Guajira, including *las trochas*. To cross these trails, travelers need to pay. This route takes between 30 and 45 minutes to cross and is blocked every 98 to 131 foot by rope, forcing those who pass to pay. The entire business is illegal; these travelers are bypassing Colombian customs.

“It's a kind of improvised toll. The payment serves as a guarantee of safe passage through *las trochas*,” said Alexander Zavarce, a Venezuelan in his early 30s who has passed through this same route several times. He is a craftsman and sells his homemade Venezuelan goods in Santa Marta because he can make money from the currency exchange.

These “unofficial” roads are dangerous places; no law enforcement or security officers were visible to a recent visitor and other crossers reported similar absences, despite claims from the Colombian government to the contrary. Guajiros have allowed people from both countries to cross this part of the border by car since 2015, when Venezuela’s government banned vehicular crossings on government-regulated roads. Now, the regular roads are used only by pedestrians, restricting how much migrants can carry with them on their journey.

There are three types of Venezuelan migrants who cross the border into Colombia through the Guajira zone: those who go back and forth to Maicao to buy products that are scarce in Venezuela; merchants who go to Colombia to sell merchandise and evade official border crossings to avoid taxes; and, finally, those who want to emigrate. By crossing via *las trochas* by car or truck, all three categories of people may take their belongings -- suitcases, washing machines, mattresses, furniture -- without reporting them to the authorities.

Additionally, crossing at La Raya, either through the illegal *trochas* or the legal Paraguachon checkpoint, gives people the option not to have their passports stamped. Even though the law mandates that authorities stamp every passport, no one actually controls for this in La Raya. Whether travelers cross by car or on foot, it is a personal decision whether or not they wish to have their passport stamped. Because of this, it impossible for authorities to quantify how many people actually cross at this point. What many immigrants don’t understand is that the passport stamp will prove valuable later. But at that moment, in the crossing, it seems superfluous.

In the Guajira zone, neither the Venezuelan nor the Colombian authorities have a voice or a vote on *las trochas* and their business. Neither do the migrants. “It is risky, but it is worth it,” said Freycelis Porras, another Venezuelan migrant who crossed via La Raya.

For most migrants, the conditions they encounter upon arriving at *las trochas* takes them by surprise: no one tells them that they will have to pass these trails. Just before entering the Guajira zone, the taxi or truck driver tells the passengers they must choose if they want to cross the border by foot or keep going by car. If they choose to walk, they will need to carry their own

stuff. Due the unexpected and unknown situation, 70 percent chose *las trochas*. At that point, the journey feels too risky: most begin praying; and others simply remind themselves how bad Venezuela is in order to do not feel any regret about it. Then they keep going into La Raya, into the no man's land, into an unknown future.

Arrival, Relief, and unknown Future

From the bus station in Maicao, on Colombia's border, Venezuelans take the bus to the cities of Riohacha, Santa Marta, or Barranquilla, looking for any better future. The scene at the bus station is shocking; after many hours traveling from different Venezuelan cities, and then through *las trochas* plus the unease, their weariness is manifested on their faces. Adults look listless and sad, yet they seem to have a hint of hope. Mothers, young boys and girls, and children sit on the ground, scattered around the station. Some bring with them old suitcases, big, black plastic trash bags full of clothes, small cardboard boxes, and some with electrical household appliances - fans or even small washing machines. This is what is left of their lives, small scraps of their livelihood. In Maicao, the Venezuelans feel that they have made it.

René Medina, is a 27 years-old from Maracaibo, a border city in Venezuela. "When you cross the border, you start to breath another air, you feel that you are in another place with another energy," Medina said. "Contrary to Venezuela, in general the environment seems dark."

“My country is a rich country,”

Venezuela’s exodus is unique. It is not easily apparent why citizens of an oil-rich country could be forced to leave their homeland. Even Venezuelans don’t understand.

“It is an unfair situation as a rich country, that we need to leave our country,” said a shirtless Rene Medina, sitting on his worn, black, legless sofa, wearing grey jeans. A tiny fan whirled at its maximum capacity, but the excessive heat and humidity made Medina’s face sweat.

Medina lives in Santa Marta in a small rented house on a hillside, accessible via 60 stairs through barrio Santa Ana. Medina lives in a tiny cinderblock house with two tiny rooms and a combination living room/kitchen. In addition to his wife and son, Medina lives in this small space with two small nieces, a sister-in-law, and a cousin who arrived in August.

In his living room/kitchen, besides the couch, there is a portable gas stove with two burners, a hammock and a small fan. The kitchen is sparse: just some plates, cutlery and a small fridge, the minimum necessary.

The rooms have no closets; one mattress lies on the floor. In the room where Medina sleeps with his wife and son, a rope stretches diagonally across a corner of the room and clothes hang from hangers on it. Shoes are arranged neatly side-by-side in a corner of the concrete floor. About two feet above the shoes, there are three tables holding toiletries. The tables also hold food that does not fit on the small counter that divides the kitchen room. Here there is food, despite the cramped quarters; in Venezuela there may have been more space, but there was no food. Everything is very tidy and clean.

“I was comfortable in Venezuela, where I lived, with my mom, I had a nice house with air conditioning and amenities,” Medina said. “Now, I don’t even live as a middle class [person], I can barely survive. I do not feel dissatisfied, but it is not the same comfort.”

In Venezuela, over recent decades, poverty has been increasing, but residents have paid below market rates for public utilities, such as water and electricity. Therefore, even being lower middle class in a city like Maracaibo, where Medina was born, for example, it was possible to afford luxuries such as air conditioning. In addition, the government sponsored social programs of lower-income people such as Medina.

But those advantages aren’t enough to sustain workers like Medina, who made his living as a baker, and a goldsmith, and a gardener. Any benefits were undermined by Venezuela’s astronomical inflation rate of 2,350 percent, the highest in the world according to the International Monetary Fund. There is never enough to cover the basic necessities.

“In Venezuela, if you had breakfast, you couldn’t not have lunch and if you had lunch, you couldn’t have dinner,” said Medina.

He now has no documents, but does bicycle delivery in Santa Marta and gets paid in cash daily. This amount is just enough for him to survive. With this money, he pays the bills, and also sends money to his mother who is in Venezuela.

Medina chose Santa Marta because his brother-in-law was there before him, serving as his motivation and contact to make the move. He arrived alone, but after three months brought his wife and son to Santa Marta. According to his calculations, it was cheaper to bring them to Colombia than to continue sending money and food to Venezuela.

The crisis comes at a time when Venezuela continues to be the country with the largest proven oil reserves in the world, according to a recent OPEC Annual Statistical Bulletin 2017 with 24.8 percent of the world crude oil reserves. Its economy completely depends on the oil industry, 95 percent of the country's revenues rely on the sale of oil. Venezuelan's dependence on oil led it to entered into the worst economic free fall in its history in 2014, when the world oil price plummeted at the same time at the state-owned Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), lowered its petroleum production.

The report also shows that Venezuela's oil production fell 13 percent between 2016 and 2017. Besides the problems in the oil industry, the country has suffered under corruption and a socialist experiment that spent more than it took in. By 2014, Venezuelans began to face shortages of food and medicines, and a reduction in water and electricity services. Poverty rose; and government-subsidized social programs disappeared.

Venezuela is a land of wealth and natural resources. For many years, Venezuela received immigrants who fled wars, dictatorships and hunger. Venezuelans never anticipated that they would suffer the same experiences as those immigrants. They never thought they would be forced to leave their land. Neither did neighboring countries believe that they would become the destination for immigrants from the richest country in the region.

Back home, Medina once worked in a bakery, but his pay at the bakery was not enough to adequately feed his family of four. There came a point when his 1-year-old son became dangerously sick from eating only sardines with yam every day. It was time to leave.

He crossed via *las trochas* without stamping his passport (making him undocumented and ineligible to work with proper documentation). He arrived in Santa Marta in January, 2017.

In Colombia, he's better off than he was in Venezuela. But he is still not happy; he, like other migrants, knows of his country's wealth and yearns to return home. He believes there is money in Venezuela.

"My country is a rich country," Medina said. "It has enough oil to gift, even to pay the debt to neighboring countries. I know it because in every corner where I live in Maracaibo [Venezuela], there is an abandoned oil well because there are no spare parts to repair it."

“I think that President Nicolás Maduro should resigned his position.”

For Medina, Venezuela’s crisis is not the fault of current president Nicolás Maduro. Medina reiterates the Venezuelan government’s explanation for what caused his country’s fall: the “economic war” that exists between the United States and Venezuela. He said that United States wants to be the owner of the Venezuela’s oil and therefore sabotages the stability of the country by imposing economic sanctions on Venezuela, for example.

“I think that President Nicolás Maduro should resigned his position because he does not know how to face the situation as it is,” Medina said. “He does not know how to fare against the Americans, and to deal with them like the former president Hugo Chávez Frías did. Chávez confronted them and took them out of the country.”

Medina said he believes that Maduro is unaware of what happening in his country -- especially about the flood of Venezuelans to Colombia. A new president could end the poverty and hunger the country is going through right now, Medina said.

Hugo Chávez Frías, the previous president of Venezuela, won the elections in 1998 and stayed in power continuously until 2013, when he died of cancer. While he was in power, Chávez changed the constitution and implemented massive reforms in the country, the most significant of which converted the economic system from capitalism to socialism; it was not completely successful. One of his best-known positions was against the capitalism of the United States. Chávez tightened a close relationship with Cuban dictator Fidel Castro; many if Chavez’s followers considered Castro Chávez’s main mentor in political issues.

Some experts and citizens consider Chávez a socialist leader who tended to poor people. Others saw him as a populist president who abused his power and changed the rules to perpetuate his own reign. His last campaign slogan before his death: “Chávez until 2021!”

Chavez’s “revolution” lasted 18 years. After Chavez died, he left his successor, the current president Nicolas Maduro. In March 2017, the Venezuela Supreme Court dissolved the democratically elected National Assembly. Critics accuse Maduro of eliminating the democratic thread in Venezuela.

The migrants have different opinions about this.

Policarpa Arevalo, the 63-year-old, for example, said that what ended Venezuela, among other things, was the government's mismanagement and corruption. She remembers that before Hugo Chávez won the presidency in 1998, Venezuela was better than now. However, she recognizes that there was also a lot of social inequality and poverty in Venezuela before.

“The poverty in Venezuela was significant and there were only two political parties that took turns in presidential elections. By then there was a lot of social resentment,” Arevalo said. “Thus, when someone like Chávez came and tells the people that he is going to pay attention of the necessity of them, something it was not happened before, he earned the sympathies of the majority of the population. Chávez knew how to exploit that social resentment and won the elections with the support of that population,”

Arevalo never supported Chávez. She thinks that he is the cause of what is happening in Venezuela now. But, she said, Maduro is worse.

Adjusting to a New Country and Creating a New Life

Creating a new life is part of the challenge. The Venezuelan migrants must adjust to the rules of their new country, facing different cultural norms, wondering if and when it's possible to return home. Many whose passports are not stamped live hidden lives.

Medina couldn't have fathomed how difficult it would be to adjust to the work routine.

"When I came, I did not think the job was going to be so rough. It does not compare with Venezuela," he said. "There, you work half a day and the payment is like you would have work full time. Here, in Santa Marta, you have to work too much. In addition, one goes through humiliations because if you do not have a Colombian identification you cannot claim anything or demand anything. You're nobody."

Medina thinks that if something happens to him or someone intends to hurt him, as he had already experienced, no one would recognize him due to his status; a man without any legal documentation cannot be protected.

"When I arrived I was very afraid that the police would catch me and take me to immigration authorities," he said. "I did not pass near any police stations, even though it was on the road where I was going, I went back as far away as it was possible, all because of fear."

For Medina, the most difficult part of migrating was leaving his family, including a daughter from a previous relationship, his mother, his sisters, and friends.

“Leaving my country is something unexpected and painful, said Medina. “It is painful to leave the country where one was born where one already has a life, to come to another country to create another. Because that's what I do here, create a new life.”

Medina was fired from his second job in Santa Marta because he refused to work two hours more at night without being paid for it. But the next day, he begged to be reinstated. He realized he had few options since he is in Colombia without documentation. The employer refused to rehire him.

Policarpa Arevalo: Migrated at 62

Medina was uprooted at 27, with no papers, with only a few family members, and no apparent future. Arevalo, on the other hand, started over in Santa Marta at 62. She had dual citizenship, though, because her mother is Colombian – a major a advantage. Her oldest of three daughters was already living in Santa Marta and Arevalo was able to get a solid job as a hairdresser. Despite her better legal status, her feelings about her migration parallel Medina's.

In Santa Marta, Arevalo has adopted the same ritual that she had in Venezuela getting ready for work. She wears black clothing, applies her makeup meticulously, styles her hair carefully, and wears black platform shoes.

In her daughter's house, Arevalo has her own room and bathroom. The house is a spacious, two-story chalet-style structure 20 minutes from downtown Santa Marta. The subdivision sits behind high concrete walls, watched over by security guards. There is a bus stop nearby and the salon where she works is 10 minutes away by foot.

Arevalo was born in Colombia, but migrated to Venezuela when she was 9 years old. She came back to Colombia in October 2016.

"I never thought about returning to live here," Arevalo said. "But I had no option, I was forced to migrate because of the difficult situation in Venezuela.

"This migration experience that is happening to me today, I think it happened to my mom too but in the opposite direction," she said. "My mom went to Venezuela at the age of 25 looking for better job and opportunities. Just as Venezuelans received my mom, so Colombians are receiving me today here in Santa Marta."

Since the 60s, Colombians have been migrating to Venezuela due the economic situation, the war against drug trafficking, as well as guerrillas and paramilitary groups that took over in many rural areas in Colombia. During this period, even until the 1990s and later, Venezuela was in a better place because of oil revenues. Now, the migration is in the opposite direction.

The descendants of those Colombian families who stayed in Venezuela, their children and grandchildren are now migrating to Colombia to live legally because they enjoy the benefit of dual citizenship, according to María Clara Robayo, researcher and specialist in Venezuelan migration at the Universidad del Rosario in Colombia.

Robayo identifies four migratory waves of Venezuelans to Colombia since 2005. The first were the upper class Venezuelans, especially wealthy people and professionals working for oil companies. The second wave came in 2008 to 2012, upper middle class people who could bring business and consumer products into Colombia. The third wave, from 2012 to 2014, was made up of professionals and students. In this period, Robayo said, the request for dual citizenship became much more recurrent.

The fourth and final wave began in 2016 after the Colombian-Venezuelan border was closed for a year. This group has a very different profile: it is predominantly an informal one because it crosses the border through the roads and illegal trails. It is a more vulnerable people, working class people who show signs of malnutrition.

“With this last wave, Venezuelans begin to be perceived as threatening, which puts Colombian security, jobs, etc. at risk. It seems that we have forgotten that it is a migration that has been happening for 17 years and that it obeys different social structures,” said Robayo.

Arevalo agrees. Although the people of Santa Marta have treated her very well, she has also heard bad comments towards Venezuelans.

“Sometimes the customers where I work speak badly about Venezuelan people. And I tell them a local slang that is ‘butterfly does not remember when it was a worm,’” she said.

Forty percent of the Venezuelans who crossed the border to Colombia by August, 2017 have double citizenship, according to the International Organization of Migration, part of the United Nations.

Migrants with double citizenship have the challenge of dealing with competing allegiances. In the case of Venezuelan migrants, even though they respect their Colombian roots, and feel grateful for the opportunity, their heart is still in Venezuela.

“Because yes, it's true, I was born here in Colombia and when I listen to the Colombian anthem I get bumps, it excites me. Part of my heart is being a Colombian,” Arevalo said.

“But when I heard the Venezuelan anthem… This happens to me,” she said, weeping. “I cry. "

Poli, as her friends and family call Policarpa Arévalo, had her own hair beauty salon in the third large city in Venezuela called Valencia. It is an industrial city. But the business went bankrupt because she, like the rest of the Venezuelans, spent the whole day queuing to find and buy food. For this reason, the business spent much more time closed than open.

“I already had everything in Venezuela. What did I expect at 62 years of age in my life? to be relaxing in my house without any worries, enjoying the life with my daughters working,

and I keep practicing my profession because I have always liked it," she said. "Now I feel like I'm starting again. Not from scratch because I have one of my daughters here and she helps me. But here I have nothing."

In Venezuela she began to suffer from depression, and feelings of hopelessness. Her daughter living in Colombia sent her money, but the scarcity of basic necessities was getting worse. Nothing improved, and with the situation there, the social climate continued to deteriorate.

"Of course I felt depressed," said Arevalo, "Even I was spending 10 hours or more in those queues hungry, and suffering different types of abuse, the worst part is many times at the end of the day I arrived to my home without food for that night or for the next day. Not even bread, because the bakery rationed the amount of bread that you could buy. This was our daily hustle in Venezuela, and has been constant suffering for a long time."

In Santa Marta, she works as a hairdresser, but not as the owner as she was before. The money that she earns is to help her daughters in Venezuela.

"I only think about what they need. It is a concern that is always in my mind and my heart," Arevalo said. Since she arrived in 2016 she has not been to Venezuela because it is better to send the money than to spend it on paying the return by road or *las trochas*.

"I do not have enough to do both," she said.

Back home, Arevalo left not only her house, but also her other two daughters.

“When I’m going to obtain again the things that I already had … a car or my own home?” she asked. “I really didn’t want to migrate.”

It was not been easy to Arevalo to start over at 62. Although she is comfortable with her daughter, she thinks that living in Colombia is a temporary solution while Venezuela improves.

“I have all my memories in Venezuela,” she said. “My first loves were there. All my life. I miss everything, I had 40 years working in my profession there.”

Arevalo said she believes her identity and her personality have changed. She has lost spontaneity and joy in her new life. In Venezuela, she was "the life of the party."

"When you migrate, it's like when a loved one dies. As the days go by, you realize that what you lost will not come back. That what is no longer and is a reality. And that reality hits you. And you do not want to accept it. And you feel alone, it's a grief,” said Arevalo.

“When you migrate, you lose a lot. You do not know, for example who your neighbors are, if they would accept you or not,” she said. “I try to behave myself in a way that they do not think anything bad about me. We always look for acceptance, we want to be accepted.”

Venezuelan migration specialist, Mara Clara Robayo says that the Venezuelans migrants are unique.

“Unlike other Latin American migrants, the Venezuelan migrant has a strong feeling of exile,” Robayo said. “It is a very cohesive population and they feel that they have lost something, a thing in common. it is a migration that is prone to return” to their homeland.

“Venezuela is going to improve and I know I will return”

Experts have called the Venezuelan migration the biggest one in the region in the modern times. The Americas deputy director for research at Amnesty International, Dr. Carolina Jimenez, has defined it as "the new refugees of the Americas" in an article published in the SIC magazine of the Centro Gumilla Foundation in Venezuela in October 2017. And in its March 2018 report, the United Nations Refugee Agency, UNHCR, asked the countries in the Americas region to treat Venezuelan migrants as a “refugees” and bring them accessibility to a legal protection.

Since 2017 Venezuelan phenomenon migration has changed drastically, according to studies. A report published by the Observatorio Laboral de la Universidad del Rosario on August 2017, indicated that 348,312 Venezuelans emigrated to Colombia between 2011 and 2016, but almost half (47.11 percent) arrived in the last two years, 2015 and 2016. The other 52.89 percent (184,226 people) had emigrated between two and six years ago.

By the end of 2017, it is estimated about 600,000 Venezuelans were in Colombian territory according the report of Migration Colombia published on February 22, 2018, a little increase than what the Observatorio reports by August of 2017.

However, it is speculated that the figure may reach more than 1 million people when taking into account those people who are not reported, especially those who enter Colombia through routes such as *las trochas* in La Raya, Paraguachón.

Because Colombia is a neighboring country, and the crisis in Venezuela is getting worse, the numbers of Venezuelan migrating to Colombia are increasing.

“Venezuelans can escape from the Venezuelan reality while staying close to their country. The geographical proximity produces the comfort of traveling to Venezuela and returning to Colombia by road,” said Robayo.

In July 2017, the Colombian government began to create some migration policies that allow them a better control of this influx of migrants to the country, such as the Border Mobility Card (known by its Spanish-language acronym, TM) for migrants who back and forth from Venezuela to Colombia daily, and the Special Permit of Permanence (PEP) that allows migrants to stay 90 days in Colombia. On February of 2018, the Colombia government created the Especial Migration Task Force (known by its Spanish-language acronym, GEM), the implementation of biometric equipment in the border control posts, and the creation of a procedure for the characterization of Venezuelans who get into the country. In addition, the General Director of Migration in Colombia, Christian Krüger Sarmiento, indicated on February 22, 2018 that in the first weeks of that month the controls had increased in the seven checkpoints of the Colombo-Venezuelan border.

The process is not easy because it is forced. Creating a new life is a challenge even with the benefit to be in country culturally closer, with the same language, and similar customs, also relatives. Venezuelan migrants struggle with mixes of feelings: fear, uncertainty, sadness, and nostalgia among others. At any age, with or without paper, the process seems the same.

“I am not an ungrateful person. I do not feel bad here in Santa Marta. But, I feel that this situation it's like a dream, it is not real, and I want to wake up. I do not want to be buried here. I know that I am going to return to Venezuela to live in my house, in my land. Venezuela is going to improve and I know I will return,” Arevalo said.

Despite their relief at finding refuge in Colombia, because of the insurmountable challenges they face, Venezuelans still have a hope to return home. A home that will certainly be different if they returned. By that time, these Venezuelans migrants would have two homes: Venezuela and Colombia, repeating the migration cycle yet again. For now, many will call Santa Marta home.

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